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A PERSPECTIVE ON USAGE--STANDARD VS. SUBSTANDARD.

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DESPITE EFFORTS TO SUBSTITUTE "DIALECT" FOR "USAGE" IN THE GRAMMARIAN'S VOCABULARY, THERE IS STILL A PLACE FOR THE LATTER TERM, FOR WITHIN ANY DIALECT THERE ARE MANY CHOICES OF FORM, WORD, AND CONSTRUCTION. THE TEACHING OF USAGE CAN BE FOUNDED ON TWO SIMPLE PRINCIPLES--(1) THE EXTENT OF SOCIAL PENALTY FOR USING THE ITEM AND (2) THE FREQUENCY OF ITS USE. THUS, A STANDARD OF MINIMUM ACCEPTABILITY CAN BE ESTABLISHED BY TEACHERS, AND STUDENTS CAN BE ENCOURAGED THROUGH GENTLE CORRECTION TO BECOME SENSITIVE TO DIFFERENCES IN LEVELS OF USAGE. A CURRICULUM IN USAGE, THEN, SHOULD NOT BE BASED ON A PRESCRIPTIVE SET OF RULES, BUT RATHER ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN UNDERSTANDING OF HOW LANGUAGE WORKS AND OF HOW TO MAKE INTELLIGENT AND APPROPRIATE CHOICES AMONG THE VARIETY OF WAYS AN IDEA CAN BE EXPRESSED. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS, PROCEEDINGS OF THE SPRING INSTITUTES, 1963." CHAMPAIGN, ILL., NCTE, 1963.) (DL)

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A PERSPECTIVE ON USAGE—STANDARD VS. SUBSTANDARD

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Since we address ourselves today to the study of English usage, it will be well to start with a consideration of what we mean by usage. The term is subject to a good deal of confusion, especially in relation to the term "grammar," and, indeed, its right to be used at all is challenged. In an article appearing in the *Wisconsin English Journal* of April, 1962, Professor Robert Williams says, "'Usage' is one of the most abused words in the English teacher's vocabulary . . . it is time that we looked into the linguists' vocabulary for a new word which would be more honest and descriptive." If we take Dr. Williams literally, the word "usage" is less than satisfactorily honest and descriptive. The word he supplies is "dialect." We are, he says, to avoid "usage" and speak of the "dialect of the privileged or educated classes." I do not accept such a limitation of terms.

The Meanings of Usage

I am impelled first to point out to Dr. Williams that within the compass of any dialect there are many optional choices of form, word, and construction. I may speak of the room's dimensions or the dimensions of the room. Both are "standard English" (the term Dr. Williams prefers) but my choice is a matter of usage. Still speaking standard English I may say, "May I take your car?" or "Can I take your car?" My choice of *can* or *may* is usage within the dialect. Again in standard English I may inquire, "From whom is it?" or more frequently, "Who is it from?" My selection is again a matter of usage. If these acts of choice cannot be described as usage, then what term does apply? Truly they are not "dialect," for any possible definition of "the dialect of the privileged or educated classes" would have to include these and many other alternatives.

It is true indeed that "usage" is also employed as the term to describe the choice between "he done it good" and "he did it well." It is also true that the speaker of "he done it good" and similar constructions speaks a dialect different from that of the one who habitually says, "He did it well." Despite the possible confusion between the two levels of applications of the word "usage," the word is too valuable to suppress. I query whether verbicide is any more respectable than homicide.

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A review of the writings of modern linguists reveals no avoidance of the word "usage," and its appearance as a major subject in this institute is further evidence of its acceptability. On one point I would agree with Dr. Williams, namely that the term "usage" must not be considered a synonym for "correctness" nor must it be used to mean only acceptable usage. No one could deny that it has been so abused. But the term is broader than that.

Some years ago I defined usage in a publication (Robert C. Pooley, *Teaching English Grammar*, 1957, p. 106) and I am willing to stand upon this definition still. "Usage is to grammar as etiquette is to behavior. Behavior simply notes what people do; etiquette sets a stamp of approval or disapproval upon actions, or sets up standards to guide actions. The specific business of usage, therefore, is to determine what choices and discriminations are made in the use of English, and then to analyze the forces, social and psychological, which determine the choices. In practical terms, usage is the study which notes the variety of choices made in the use of English, observes the standards set up by such choices or created to influence such choices, and attempts to evaluate the validity of such standards."

Attitudes toward Usage

The teaching implications of this definition should be reasonably clear. First of all, we note that what we mean by usage is the way people use language: "I ain't got no pencil" is as much a phenomenon of usage as "I don't have a pencil." But second, usage is concerned with the choice between these locutions. The person who says "I don't have a pencil" does so for reasons of habit, choice, or sensibility to the social effects of word patterns. The one who says "I ain't got no pencil" does so from exposure to certain patterns of language use and habits derived therefrom, and is lacking in, or indifferent to, sensitivity to the effects of word patterns in various social situations. Correction of the second speaker is certainly not a matter of punishment or shame, nor is it a matter of grammar, in the sense of studying the structures involved. Actually communication is equally clear in either locution. Correction then becomes a matter of awakening sensitivities to social expectation, similar in approach to teaching a little boy to remove his hat in church, and a little girl to say "please" and "thank you." Usage, therefore, can never be concerned with absolutes. No element of language in use can be said to be entirely right or entirely wrong. Each element has to be evaluated in its linguistic context, with regard to a number of variables, and even after this evaluation is made, no clear right and wrong will appear. Rather there will be a sense of degree

of appropriateness, with allowance for a tolerable range of deviations. What is the difference between "I shall be pleased to join you," and "Sure, count me in"? There is no right or wrong, good or bad, here; not even a decision of appropriateness until all the contextual and social factors have been weighed. Ultimately it will be seen that in some situations the second is preferable. The person who can use either pattern in its appropriate place is the person skilled in English usage, the goal toward which our instruction is directed.

The prescriptive view of usage, in which certain patterns are labelled *wrong* and other patterns are labelled *right* without regard to context and social setting, is still evidenced in many school books and courses of study and especially in popular views about language. The large number of well-educated people who say "Between you and I" do so with conscious pride in avoiding the error of "you and me" to which they have attached the label "wrong" as a result of overzealous teachers in early school years. Today a new use of *as* as a preposition is developing from the overteaching of the avoidance of *like*. I see on students' papers now such sentences as, "My mother, as other mothers, would not let me out at night," or "Most of my friends, as John, like the movies." This is clearly a replacement of the preposition *like* by the conjunction *as*. Why? Because prescriptive teachers have so firmly set the stamp of *wrong* on *like* that students avoid it even in its historically proper use. It is not *like* that is wrong, but the teachers who label it so.

We need not wonder at the persistence of the prescriptive view of usage. After all, it developed in the eighteenth century, became firmly established in the nineteenth, dictated the attitudes of textbooks of the early twentieth century, and is still present in many current texts. Only in the late twenties of this century was a clear alternative presented and defended by such leaders as Sterling Andrews Leonard and Charles C. Fries. They and their followers have established what may be called the observational or relative theory of English usage, namely, that usage is what happens in language, and that many factors contribute to the formation of standards by which patterns of usage are to be judged. It was my privilege as a member of this group to write a definition of good English in these terms in 1931, a definition which was adopted by the National Council of Teachers of English and is now frequently cited without reference to its source. Allow me to repeat it now, as it contains the elements which describe the attitude toward usage I would like to make as my contribution to this linguistic institute. "Good English is that form of speech which is

appropriate to the purpose of the speaker, true to the language as it is, and comfortable to speaker and listener. It is the product of custom, neither cramped by rule nor freed from all restraint; it is never fixed, but changes with the organic life of the language."

In the Classroom

The question raised by a good many teachers at this point is, "How can I teach students to speak and write correctly if usage is relative and nothing is really right or wrong?" This is a practical question and I shall try to give a practical answer. When the baby in the house says, "Me want milk" or "Me want a cookie," the conscientious mother, before providing milk or cookie, helps the infant to say, "I want milk," "I want a cookie." The repetition of these expected patterns aids the child to form the habit of using them. He is more likely to establish these patterns if his parents themselves are accurate and he is gently corrected each time he errs. The teaching of usage in elementary schools should be as much along these lines as possible: a teacher who is himself accurate in socially acceptable usage, and who gently corrects his students when they deviate from accepted forms. In junior and senior high schools this method of ear-training in usage is better than any other, for to a degree beyond common belief, the errors in usage in the written work of students are the reflection of unconsciously retained speech patterns.

The establishment of a curriculum of usage teaching is founded on the application of two simple principles: 1) How much social penalty does the usage item bear? and 2) how frequent is its use? At any grade the basic curriculum in usage consists of those items which carry the heaviest social penalty and are most frequent in use. Items which occur rarely and carry slight social penalty can be postponed or omitted. It is therefore possible to make lists at each grade level, from observation of the spoken and written English of the children, of the items of usage most in need of instruction, and of those items which may be left untaught at that grade. Obviously the needs of individual children will differ widely, but the objective is to bring the class as a group to the minimum acceptable level in all spoken and written work.

Without any violation of the principles of frequency and social penalty we can set a standard of minimum acceptability, provided we stand ready to alter it in accordance with changes which are taking place all the time in English usage. I offer the following list as an example:

1. The elimination of all baby-talk and "cute" expressions.
2. The correct uses in speech and writing of *I, me, he, him, she, her, they, them.* (Exception, *it's me.*)
3. The correct uses of *is, are, was, were* with respect to number and tense.
4. Correct past tenses of common irregular verbs such as *saw, gave, took, brought, bought, stuck.*
5. Correct use of past participles of the same verbs and similar verbs after auxiliaries.
6. Elimination of the double negative: *we don't have no apples,* etc.
7. Elimination of analogical forms: *ain't, hisn, hern, ourn, theirselves,* etc.
8. Correct use of possessive pronouns: *my, mine, his, hers, theirs, ours.*
9. Mastery of the distinction between *its,* possessive pronoun, *it's, it is.*
10. Placement of *have* or its phonetic reduction to *v* before *I* and a past participle.
11. Elimination of *them* as a demonstrative pronoun.
12. Elimination of *this here* and *that there.*
13. Mastery of use of *a* and *an* as articles.
14. Correct use of personal pronouns in compound constructions: as subject (Mary and *I*), as object (Mary and *me*), as object of preposition (to Mary and *me*).
15. The use of *we* before an appositional noun when subject; *us,* when object.
16. Correct number agreement with the phrases *there is, there are, there was, there were.*
17. Elimination of *he don't, she don't, it don't.*
18. Elimination of *learn* for *teach, leave* for *let.*
19. Elimination of pleonastic subjects: *my brother he; my mother she; that fellow he.*
20. Proper agreement in number with antecedent pronouns *one* and *anyone, everyone, each, no one.* With *everybody* and *none* some tolerance of number seems acceptable now.
21. The use of *who* and *whom* as reference to persons. (But note, *Who did he give it to?* is tolerated in all but very formal situations. In the latter, *To whom did he give it?* is preferable.)

22. Accurate use of *said* in reporting the words of a speaker in the past.
23. Correction of *lay down* to *lie down.*
24. The distinction between *good* as adjective and *well* as adverb. e.g., He spoke *well.*
25. Elimination of *can't hardly, all the farther* (for *as far as*) and *Where is he* (*she, it*) *at?*

This list of twenty-five kinds of corrections to make constitutes a very specific standard of current English usage for today and the next few years. Some elements in it may require modification within ten years; some possibly earlier. Conspicuous by their absence are these items which were on the usage lists by which many of us here were taught; which survive today in the less enlightened textbooks:

1. Any distinction between *shall* and *will*
2. Any reference to the split infinitive
3. Elimination of *like* as a conjunction
4. Objection to the phrase "different than"
5. Objection to "He is one of those boys who *is*. . ."
6. Objection to "the reason. . . is because. . ."
7. Objection to *myself* as a polite substitute for *I* as in "I understand you will meet Mrs. Jones and myself at the station."
8. Insistence upon the possessive case standing before a gerund

These items and many others like them will still remain cautionary matter left to the teacher's discretion. In evaluating the writing of a superior student I would certainly call these distinctions to his attention and point out to him the value of observing them. But this is a very different matter from setting a basic usage standard to be maintained. I think it is fair to say that the items I have listed in the basic table lie outside the tolerable limits of acceptable, current, informal usage; those I have omitted from the basic table are tolerated at least, and in some instances are in very general use.

Disputed Usage: Making Decisions

We come now to the interesting matter of divided and debatable usage. These are the items of language use which are widely current, which are often heard in public speech and frequently appear in print, yet are condemned by many textbooks and are disliked by conservative teachers, editors, and other language-conscious people. First, let it be granted that anyone may say, "I don't like that word and I won't use it." This is certainly a right which any individual

may exercise. But if he says, "I don't like that word and therefore *you* are wrong, ignorant, or malicious when you use it," we have another matter. It is concerning these matters that the good judgment of teachers and editors is called into play. I shall illustrate some cases of disputed usage to show how judgments may be formed.

1. *Proven* as participle of prove. Condemned as an illogical formation. Now fully acceptable.
2. Misplaced *only*. Condemned in many grammar books in the construction, "I *only* had five dollars." Has a long literary history and is now fully acceptable.
3. *Data* as singular. "I had a hard time collecting this *data*." Condemned in the singular because it is a Latin plural. Now widely used in high level journals. Has become a singular collective noun.
4. The *reason* I came late *is because* I wanted to. This construction still evokes howls of rage from some professors. It is condemned by practically all handbooks. Yet it has a long and honorable history and is used by reputable writers today. Why condemn it?

There is a fair and practical test to apply to items of this kind. It is a threefold test in answer to these questions:

a. Is the item in reasonably common use today?
b. Does it have a continuous history of use in English for a century or more?
c. Was it used in the past, and is it used today, by writers of acknowledged reputation?

If the answers to these questions are affirmative, then the item is unquestionably in good use, no matter what grammarians and critics may say.

Some of you may have the question in mind, "What about preparation for college? I may allow these debatable usages, but my students, and I also, will be condemned for permitting these errors to go unchecked." This is another practical question, and it has a practical answer. Suppose your student writes, "The reason why Hamlet didn't kill the king immediately was because he was not sure of his guilt." You may in all fairness write in the margin, "Avoid this construction." Do not treat it as an error, but caution the student that college professors and other well-informed persons will take exception to it, and to play safe he had better avoid it.

An Outlook

In conclusion, allow me to suggest a frame of mind toward all usage instruction. Our wonderful English language has enormous resources and is especially rich in the varieties of ways in which the same idea may be expressed. Stimulate your students to explore these varieties of expression to come up with as many different forms as will adequately express the same meaning. In the course of these explorations some patterns will be formal and literary, some easy and colloquial, and some perhaps substandard, or socially subject to penalty. Assist your students to note these varieties of level of expression, not as matters of right and wrong, but as combinations of words establishing a *tone* to the communication. Students can readily discriminate between—"Please leave the room," "Go, now," "Beat it, kid," "Scram." Each utterance has its appropriate place, each conveys the same idea, and each establishes a tone. With such practice students can gain a feeling for words and phrases as carrying not only meaning, but the quality of social appropriateness, or tone, as well. The establishment of such sensitivities to the shades of language use is the ideal of instruction in usage. In society, the well-mannered person is one who is sensitive to all aspects of a situation and behaves in a way most appropriate to each situation, formal when it is proper, easy where desirable, familiar where acceptable. English usage is exactly parallel: to say the right thing in the appropriate manner in a suitable tone of expression is the ideal for which we are striving.

A final practical question calls for an answer. It is "Where do I find help in making judgments in matters of usage about which I am not sure?" One answer is, of course, to develop the habit of observing language usage and spotting the particular item as it occurs in speech and writing. This is the best foundation of usage judgments, and it is one which can be successfully passed on to students, to set them the task of finding evidence for usage decisions in the speech and writing that they observe. For somewhat quicker returns, recent dictionaries and handbooks of usage are the answer. I shall discuss the place of the dictionary in matters of usage in my lecture tonight. At this moment I recommend the latest and most reliable guide to English usage, entitled *Current American Usage, How Americans Say It and Write It,* by Margaret M. Bryant, published by Funk and Wagnells Co., New York, 1962. Margaret Bryant for years has been writing the usage column in the *English Journal* and in this book combines her rich experience with the contributions of many other investigators to form a useful handbook. Somewhat more literary in

flavor is *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* by Bergen and Cornelia Evans, published by Random House, New York, 1957. The authors say, "This dictionary . . . is designed for people who speak standard English but are uncertain about some details. It attempts to list the questions that most people ask, or should ask, about what is now good practice and to give the best answers available." On the whole it does these things very well; I refer you to the article on the word *like* as an example. The materials for making sound judgments in matters of usage are reliable and readily available. What is now most needed is the attitude of mind on the part of teachers and the public directed toward seeking information and using it, in the place of repeating worn-out rules which were perhaps once valid, but are superseded by the normal changes of a living language.

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